

# Letters

## BELL'S FIRST CALL . . . AND MR. YEATES

Dear Sir - On the 13th November 1928, Thomas Watson stood in one of the hallowed lecture halls at Savoy Place to address the Institution of Post Office Electrical Engineers on 'The birth and babyhood of the telephone'. On pp.323-324 of the printed version of his lecture (*P.O.E.E.J.*, 1929, 21, pp. 318-332), after recounting the episode of that famous first sentence, he is recorded as stating the following: 'Soon after the first telephones were made, Bell hired two rooms on the top floor of an inexpensive boarding house at 5 Exeter Place, Boston . . . It was here one evening . . . that I heard the first complete sentence I have just told you about'.

A. D. Dunn will no doubt rise in the best traditions of Pulham Down to the challenge which I now issue: produce a similarly unequivocal quotation from the correspondence of Alexander Graham Bell in support of the contention that the honour popularly accorded to Boston really belongs to Brantford, Ontario, (Feb. 1978 *E&P*, p.102). It is curious that Prof. J. E. Flood in his centenary article (Mar. 1976 *E&P*, pp. 159-162) reproduced the crucial page of Bell's notebook and certainly implied that the episode there recounted occurred in Boston.

Being a gentleman, I would leave the matter here, but the Mad Matrician (who has recently moved with me from Salford to Dublin) insists, from the depths of his umbrage, that the honour of the first genuinely intelligible telephonic transmission of words belongs not to Bell at all and happened neither in Boston nor Brantford, but in Dublin!

In support of his contention he is brandishing a letter appended to the printed version of a lecture on 'The telephone' delivered by Prof. W. F. Barrett of the Royal College of Science for Ireland at Norwich on the 20th December 1877.

I should explain that the R.C.Sc.I. was the predecessor of the U.C.D. School of Engineering, and that we have inherited its building, including the library. The aforementioned lecture and letter have just come to light on its shelves. The letter is from S. M. Yeates, a philosophical instrument maker, of Grattan Street, Dublin, and is dated the 23rd January 1878. In it Mr. Yeates described how he had purchased, some years earlier, from a Mr. Ladd in London, a model of the Philip Rees telephone. This, as everybody knows, had achieved 'imperfect articulation' (in the words of Rudolph Messel, a former student of Reiss,

who corresponded with Prof. Barrett) to the extent that 'the experimenters could even communicate with each other; only such, however, which they had heard already frequently before'.

Mr. Yeates spent several months redesigning the receiver and transmitter, and gave a demonstration of his improved model at the November 1865 meeting of the Dublin Philosophical Society. He records that 'both singing and the distinct articulation of several words were heard through it, and the difference between the speakers' voices clearly recognised'. Mr. Yeates then sold his apparatus and 'did not make a second instrument to experiment with'. He cited the names of several reputable persons who attended his meeting: 'Dr. Frazer, and Messrs. W. Rigby and A. M. Vereker'.

To an Irish non-Dubliner like myself, the Yeates episode has the ring of truth. Since talking is a way of life here, the lack of excitement at an assembly of wire and metal being able to speak a few words 10½ years before Bell is not to be wondered at: it would have been more remarkable if it hadn't spoken! In the same vein, Mr. Yeates' disposal of his telephone is in keeping with casual way in which things happen in Dublin. He *did*, however, state to whom he sold it, and so MM and I are as hot on the trail as we can be after more than 112 years. - Yours faithfully,

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P.S. Since the above was written, the Brantford mystery has apparently been solved. I have just received the text of an address 'How Bell invented the telephone' given by Thomas Watson to the Annual Meeting of the American Institute of Electrical Engineers, at New York on the 18th May 1915. (*Trans. AIEE*, 1915, 34, pp. 1011-1021). There, following the account of the Boston experiments, he states: 'Up to the summer of 1876 all the tests of the telephone had been made on indoor wires but . . . it became evident to Prof. Bell that his invention was ready for higher flights. Some preliminary tests on a real line in Brantford [sic], Canada, in which the transmission was all in one direction, the return communication being by telegraph, were followed by a complete test of the telephone's practicability as a transmitter of intelligence between distant points under outdoor conditions'. This clearly places the events at Brantford several months later than the historic first sentence.